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SUBJECT: Banned Tanzania Newspaper Returns

REF: 08 Dar es Salaam 708

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¶1. (U) Summary: MwanaHALISI, banned by the GOT in October on allegations of publishing seditious material returned to the streets this week. Ambassador Green highlighted the importance of press freedoms in his exit courtesy call with Tanzanian President Kikwete. The President remarked that most African countries were not mature enough to allow unlimited media freedom. Post will continue to underscore the USG commitment to press freedoms and report septel on the expected revision to the antiquated, and much disliked, Newspapers Act of 1976. End Summary.

Banned Newspaper Re-emerges

¶2. (U) MwanaHALISI, a weekly swahili tabloid banned by the Government of Tanzania for three months under the 1976 Newspapers Act on allegations of publishing seditious material began printing again this week. Per reftel, the newspaper had published a story about an alleged conspiracy among members of the Central Committee and National Executive Committee of the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party to bar President Kikwete from running for a second term in 2010. Many observers believe the ban came down because MwanaHalisi said President Kikwete's own son, Ridhwani, was involved.

¶3. (U) Upon implementation of the ban October 13, 2008, Tanzania's Editors' Forum condemned the act as intimidation. Individual journalists, human rights activists and members of the media fraternity mounted protests, demanding that the GOT prove the "seditious" nature of the charge and send the matter to court.

¶4. (U) According to Mwanahali's Editor Jabir Idrissa, the GOT never took any of the newspaper's staff to court, but "the police continued to harass" him and publisher Saed Kubenea requiring the pair to "weekly report to the station since October and sign piece of paper." Press reports indicate the newspaper is facing four separate charges of libel by some government officials.

¶5. (U) In an email communication circulated to foreign donors, Idrissa wrote, "we are completely crippled. With the suspension of the publication, challenges have grown into insurmountable problems: our plans for expansion have been dealt a blow as our coffers have speedily gone dry."

¶6. (U) Mwanahalisi returned to the streets January 14 publishing the headline, "EPA papers vanish from BoT." The story discusses that convictions of heavyweight personalities for siphoning millions of dollars from the External Payment Arrears (EPA) account may prove difficult as "crucial documents are said to have gone missing from the Bank of Tanzania (BOT), including files of Kagoda Agriculture

Limited accused of pocketing over \$30 million." The newspaper cites sources stating that EPA funds had been distributed unsystematically resulting in poor record keeping. Mwanahalisi concludes by noting that the BOT Governor, Professor Benno Ndulu, would follow up on allegations that sensitive BOT documents have been systematically replaced by forged ones. Comment: While all Tanzanian papers have reported extensively on the EPA scandal, none have printed a story about missing documents. Mwanahalisi breaking this news suggests a continued willingness to delve deeper (or stretch available facts) than other media. End comment.

Book Published on MwanaHalisi's Experience

¶7. (U) On January 13, former chairman of the Media Council of Tanzania (MCT) Professor Issa Shivji of the University of Dar es Salaam officially launched the book entitled, "Freedom Imprisoned, 90 days of arbitrary incarceration of MwanaHALISI" written by media consultant Ndimara Tegambwage. The first-run print is 5,000 copies and supporters are seeking funding for an English translation. The book does not limit its content to Mwanahalisi's suspension only and discusses matters of free speech and press freedom, the need for courage, and the necessity for "journalists to work together for the common good of the nation and profession."

¶8. (U) During the last year, Tegambwage facilitated numerous courses through implementing partner Pact-Tanzania using Millennium Challenge Threshold Program funds, and authored the investigative journalism training manual used in Pact's courses. At the book launch, Professor Shivji told the audience, "freedom of information belongs to the people and not to journalists alone." He said that the 1976 Newspaper Act was transferred verbatim from the colonial newspaper ordinance and urged the public to demand its repeal for being "unconstitutional."

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Ambassador Raises Press Freedom with President Kikwete

¶9. (U) In his January 13 exit courtesy call with Tanzanian President Kikwete, Ambassador Green highlighted the beneficial impact of press freedoms in Tanzania, especially for areas such as combating corruption. Local English daily, The Citizen, reported the President remarked that "most African countries were not mature enough to allow unlimited media freedom, as it tends to divide a country along religious and tribal lines. Kikwete insisted that the GOT would not tolerate irresponsible reporting aimed at inciting the people."

¶10. (U) Comment: As mentioned in previous cables, Tanzania has a vibrant media environment that has seen a remarkable increase in the level of investigative reporting the past two years (with the implementation of a successful Millennium Challenge Threshold Program). The press has played a leading role in exposing corrupt activities and prodding government action. Unfortunately, we still see press freedoms infringed upon. Just as the GOT ban on Mwanahalisi concluded, the Zanzibar Revolutionary Government banned the distribution of a newspaper on the islands (septel). Post will continue to underscore the USG commitment to press freedoms and report in the future on the expected revision to the antiquated, and much disliked, Newspapers Act. End Comment.

Green